



W4TEX: Strengthening Women's Representation in Senior Textile Positions

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INTRODUCTION TO CONSUMERS' USE

European textile market

The textile industry is one of the largest and most impactful sectors in Europe, both economically and environmentally. The demand for clothing continues to rise across our territory: the European apparel market grew by an average of 4.1% per year since 2018 ([CBI, 2025](#)). Consumer behaviour plays a central role in shaping this industry. Fashion consumption in Europe is heavily influenced by cultural trends, social media, and the global push for affordability and speed in clothing production. While the industry provides billions in revenue, its environmental footprint is significant, and the widespread use and disposal of clothing are contributing to severe ecological challenges.

In Europe, clothing is much more than a basic necessity; it represents personal identity, status, and social belonging. This complex relationship between fashion and identity is central to the fast fashion model, which offers inexpensive, trendy clothing to consumers in rapid cycles. The textile industry in Europe is valued at over 170 billion euros turnover (Euratex, 2024), with consumers purchasing billions of garments every year. However, this high demand for clothing has led to an alarming rise in waste, overproduction, and resource depletion.

The concept of fast fashion—where clothing is produced quickly, cheaply, and in ever-changing styles—has become a defining feature of modern European fashion consumption. Brands like H&M, Zara, and Primark lead the charge, offering affordable, on-trend clothing that encourages consumers to buy frequently and dispose of garments after only a few uses. The fast fashion model thrives on consumers' desire for the latest trends, and it is more cost-effective to buy new clothes than to repair or maintain existing ones through an external service. As a result, consumers frequently make purchases based on immediate needs or desires, without fully considering the long-term environmental consequences, as they do not put their purchase in a long-term perspective.

However, the environmental impact of textile consumption in Europe is profound. One of the most significant problems is textile waste. Every year, nearly 7 million tons of textile waste are generated annually in the EU, among which 82% is post-consumer waste. On this, in 2024, only 27,5% were collected separately for reuse and recycling ([EEA, 2024](#)). This means that much of this clothing ends up in landfills or is incinerated, for an important detrimental impact. For more details about this topic, we recommend you have a look at our unit 7 on improved sorting and recycling.

The production of clothing requires substantial natural resources.

- For example, it takes around 2,700 litres of water to produce a single cotton t-shirt—roughly the amount of water one person drinks in two and a half years (see our unit 1 on this topic). In Europe, where water scarcity is becoming an

increasing concern in several regions, the high-water usage in textile production is a growing issue.

- The carbon footprint of the textile industry is another pressing concern. The fashion sector is responsible for about 10% of global carbon emissions, and Europe, being one of the largest markets for clothing, contributes significantly to this number. The production, transportation, and disposal of garments generate millions of tonnes of CO₂ emissions annually, further exacerbating the climate crisis. The energy-intensive processes involved in dyeing fabrics, creating synthetic fibres, and the transportation of goods across vast distances all contribute to the industry's substantial carbon emissions.
- In addition to greenhouse gases, textile waste also contributes to microplastic pollution. Synthetic fabrics, such as polyester and nylon, shed tiny plastic fibres during washing, which often end up in water systems. These microplastics have been found in oceans, rivers, and even in the food chain, affecting marine life and potentially human health.

The role of consumer choices

Consumer choices are at the heart of these environmental issues. In Europe, the demand for inexpensive, disposable clothing drives the overproduction of garments and fuels the fast fashion cycle. Many consumers remain unaware of the full environmental impact of their clothing purchases, and the lack of transparency from brands makes it difficult to assess the true costs of production. However, the rapid pace of fashion cycles, driven by the desire for constant novelty, pushes many to continue purchasing clothes at an unsustainable rate.

Research indicates that the average European buys around 42 new garments per year ([Statista, 2023](#)), contributing to the broader issue of overconsumption. As we have seen, the culture of fast fashion, characterized by overconsumption, waste, and the rapid turnover of trends, has placed immense pressure on the planet's resources and ecosystems. In this unit, we will explore the link between consumer psychology and environmental consequences in the textile industry. We will question consumer behaviour and how the consumer choices shape environmental outcomes. We will see how the concept of environmental footprint relates to individual consumer actions.

DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS OF CONSUMERS' USE

Psychological drivers of consumers' behaviours in fashion

Consumer use of textile products has an important detrimental effect on the environment. While purchase choices are influenced by psychological drivers, these same factors lead to purchasing decisions that are environmentally harmful. We will explore in this section how psychological factors such as social influence, cultural norms, and demographic differences lead to misguided purchasing decisions, ultimately contributing to the environmental degradation in the fashion industry.

Consumer choices under social and cultural influence

The impact of fashion on people is important, as it involves ([TheFashionPot, n.d.](#)):

- Identity expression
- Peer acceptance
- Self-confidence
- Impact of social media, newspapers and periodical
- Celebrities
- Financial implications
- Cultural influence
- Exploration and experimentation
- Social awareness
- High-end labels.

In many European countries, fashion is deeply tied to cultural identity and social status. The desire for exclusive items, and the "latest" trends leads to the overconsumption of high-end, low-durability goods. This desire for exclusivity and the constant need to update wardrobes to align with trends fuels the demand for new fashion, enhanced by "fast fashion" models.

Peer pressure and social norms

Peer pressure is a significant psychological factor in driving consumers to make purchases that are detrimental to the environment. In European society, where appearance is heavily influenced by social norms, individuals, particularly younger generations, feel the need to continuously update their wardrobes to keep up with trends. Shopping is a habit for social enjoyment and relaxation. It is part of people's activity and identity as they want to be fashionable and look beautiful ([Gigauri, 2024](#)). They also adopt conforming behaviours as a result of the pressure of the group: A person dresses according to the social group she wants to belong to and what is acceptable in that group (Entwistle, 2023).

This pressure to conform encourages a "disposable" approach to fashion, where garments are discarded as soon as they go out of style, ending up in landfills. This

process encourages overconsumption, with consumers purchasing clothes they do not need, just to fit in or remain socially relevant.

This trend leads to high levels of textile waste and unsustainable manufacturing practices. For instance, the demand for cheaply produced clothing encourages fast fashion brands to produce garments in large quantities using low-cost materials, which are non-biodegradable and harmful to the environment. The widespread culture of "fast fashion" is reinforced by social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, where influencers wear outfits only once, further promoting a culture of overconsumption.

Celebrity Endorsements and the Cult of "Trend Following"

Celebrity endorsements and social media influencers are another critical factor, as those are becoming drivers of fashion purchases, pushing consumers toward environmentally damaging trends. Celebrities and influencers often promote fast fashion brands.

A study by the European Parliament ([2022](#)) found that influencers affect consumers' attitudes towards brands and have an impact on purchase decision-making, in particular with younger consumers who use social media more frequently. In Italy, for instance, a consumer survey showed that 85% of consumers interviewed claim to take the opinions of influencers into consideration when buying a product. However, certain influencer marketing practices pose risks to consumers. Among the risk, the EP study identified:

- Lack of transparency and unclear disclosure
- Lack of separation between advertising and content
- Misleading messages
- Targeting vulnerable consumer groups

On an environmental level, influencers might also encourage "impulse buying," a major driver of unsustainable consumption. For example, influencers may showcase items from brands that rely on mass production, using synthetic fibres that contribute to plastic pollution in the ocean.

Demographic Differences: How Age, Gender, and Income Influence Unsustainable Purchases

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and income also shape consumer behaviour in ways that can encourage unsustainable fashion choices.

Generational behaviours

Young consumers, particularly those in the 18-34 age range, are the most susceptible to the psychological drivers that encourage unsustainable consumption. This target group is particularly important as it is at an age of forging habits that will last.

This demographic is highly influenced by social media and celebrity culture, leading to a culture of constant consumption and "buying to fit in." The increasing popularity of

influencers promoting fast fashion brands has amplified this behaviour, pushing young consumers to make impulsive, unsustainable purchases.

Gender

Women, who are traditionally more engaged with fashion, tend to make more frequent purchases than men. This overconsumption is fuelled by the pressure to keep up with trends and social expectations. Women spend more money to keep up with seasonal trends. About 41% of women feel pressured not to wear the same outfit twice when they go out ([uniformmarket, 2024](#)).

Income

Higher-income consumers purchase larger volumes of fashion. People with higher incomes generate on average 76% more clothing waste than people with lower incomes, if we compare the consumption at country level ([DeVoy, J. 2021](#)).

Fast fashion and overconsumption as predominant consumption models

The rise of fast fashion can be seen as a direct response to the growing demand for affordable, trendy clothing. In recent decades, the fashion industry has experienced a massive transformation with the emergence of fast fashion, a business model that has radically reshaped the way clothes are produced, consumed, and discarded. The term "fast fashion" refers to the rapid production of inexpensive clothing that mimics current trends and is designed to be worn for a short period before being replaced with new items. This model has revolutionized the fashion industry, making trendy, low-cost clothing accessible to a broader range of consumers.

This rapid turnover has led to a shift in consumption patterns, where consumers are now more likely to buy clothing on a whim rather than making long-term, thoughtful purchases.

This shift has resulted in a culture of excess, where people are encouraged to buy more and more clothing, without considering the long-term impact of these purchases. In the past, consumers may have purchased clothing items for their durability and timeless style, but fast fashion promotes the idea that clothes are disposable and that they should be replaced regularly to keep up with the ever-changing trends. However, while it has democratized fashion, it has also come with significant environmental and social consequences. This "buy and discard" mentality has led to an unsustainable increase in textile waste, with millions of tons of clothing ending up in landfills each year.

Overconsumption: fast fashion and the resulting waste

Cultural globalization has led to the spread of fast fashion across Europe, encouraging consumers to adopt low-cost, disposable fashion models that prioritize volume over quality. In Europe, Inditex and H&M lead the fast fashion landscape. These brands rely on rapid production cycles and cheap labour in developing countries, producing vast quantities of clothing that are discarded after only a few uses. The Europe Fast Fashion Market size was valued at over 46 billion euros in 2025 and is expected to grow by 7,7% per year by 2032 ([Coherent, 2025](#)). The emphasis on fast fashion as an affordable option drives the production of low-cost garments made with unsustainable materials and practices. This is a direct result of the cultural adoption of "value over sustainability", which ultimately contributes to the industry's environmental footprint.

According to a survey conducted in 2023, 11 percent of European consumers purchased apparel from a lower-priced retailer than they usually would as a 'trade-down' action to save money. An even higher percentage employed the same method when it came to purchasing footwear ([Statista, 2023](#)).

Despite some effort made by some fast fashion brands to increase their sustainability, low-cost clothing is of poor quality and made from synthetic materials, which do not biodegrade. These fabrics, such as polyester, contribute to microplastic pollution, a growing environmental concern.

The environmental cost of fast fashion extends beyond the materials used in clothing. The production process itself requires significant amounts of water, energy, and chemicals. For example, the textile industry is one of the largest consumers of water globally, with large quantities of water being used during dyeing and finishing processes. Additionally, the dyeing process releases toxic chemicals into nearby water sources, contributing to pollution and the destruction of local ecosystems. Fast fashion's emphasis on quick turnover also means that garments are poorly made and wear out faster, contributing to a cycle of constant consumption and disposal.

The disposable mindset encouraged by fast fashion has also led to an increase in textile waste. As clothes are worn only a few times before being discarded, the average lifespan of a garment has decreased significantly. This overconsumption has put immense pressure on landfills, where clothing takes up valuable space and emits harmful gases as it decomposes.

The concept of planned obsolescence in fashion

One of the key principles behind fast fashion is the concept of "planned obsolescence". This refers to the practice of designing products with a limited lifespan, encouraging consumers to replace them after a short period. In the case of clothing, this means creating garments that are not built to last but are instead made cheaply and to be worn out quickly. This approach is not only harmful to the environment but also to the individuals who are affected by the exploitative labour practices that accompany fast fashion production.

The idea behind planned obsolescence is that consumers will purchase more items if they are encouraged to replace old ones. This strategy helps keep sales high and ensures that fashion companies maintain their profits. However, this short-term focus comes at the expense of long-term sustainability. In an era of growing environmental awareness, many are beginning to question the ethics of producing clothing that is intentionally designed to fail after a few uses.

Fast fashion brands promote this concept of "newness", which fosters a sense of urgency to purchase the latest items before they go out of style. This constant cycle of consumption, driven by the desire to keep up with ever-changing trends, encourages people to view clothing as disposable rather than valuable, leading to a rapid increase in waste and resource depletion.

Cognitive dissonance and consumer awareness

In Europe, consumers are becoming more aware of the environmental impact of fashion, yet paradoxically, they continue to buy fast fashion products. This phenomenon of simultaneous awareness and consumption of unsustainable goods can be explained through the lens of cognitive dissonance — the psychological tension that arises when one's beliefs or attitudes conflict with their behaviors. In the case of fashion, consumers experience cognitive dissonance between their concern for the environment and their ongoing participation in the fast fashion system.

Cultural disconnect from Sustainability

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the negative environmental impact of the fast fashion production model. European Consumer research indicates the health of the planet as one of their primary global concerns. However, when consumers were asked about their main purchasing factors, cost and value for money emerged as the top drivers, selected by more than half of the respondents. In contrast, environmental and social or ethical considerations became less important as primary motivators over the past year, with only 14% and 9% of consumers choosing them, respectively. ([InnovaMarketInsights, 2024](#)). This gap between intention and action is a key example of cognitive dissonance, where consumers experience conflict between their pro-environmental attitudes and their purchasing habits.

Cognitive dissonance, first introduced by psychologist Leon Festinger in the 1950s, occurs when an individual holds two conflicting beliefs or engages in behavior that contradicts their beliefs. In the context of fast fashion, cognitive dissonance arises when consumers simultaneously recognize the negative environmental impact of their clothing choices while continuing to purchase cheap, disposable garments. This internal conflict creates discomfort, and people generally seek to reduce this discomfort by either changing their attitudes or rationalizing their behavior.

Consumers may cope with dissonance through rationalisation. Many consumers justify their fast fashion purchases by downplaying the environmental consequences. Some may argue that sustainable clothing is too expensive or difficult to access, while others may rationalise that their individual consumption does not significantly impact the global problem. For example, many consumers perceive sustainable fashion as a premium product, out of their financial reach ([GlobalFashionAgenda, 2018](#)). The high cost of eco-friendly fashion can create a barrier for individuals who are otherwise concerned about environmental issues but prioritise affordability.

Another rationalization mechanism is the belief that purchasing eco-friendly clothing is a collective responsibility and not an individual one. Only a small fraction of consumers takes personal responsibility for the environmental costs of fast fashion, with many instead expecting companies and governments to lead the charge toward sustainability. In this case, consumers believe that systemic change is needed and that their individual efforts will have little impact. This deflection of responsibility helps alleviate the psychological discomfort of participating in an industry they know to be environmentally harmful.

In addition to rationalising their purchases, consumers may also alter their attitudes to reduce dissonance. For example, some consumers adopt a “moral licensing” mindset, where they believe that purchasing fast fashion can be offset by other environmentally friendly behaviours, such as recycling or reducing energy consumption in their homes. This belief that other positive actions can “cancel out” the harm caused by fast fashion allows consumers to continue engaging in the behaviour without feeling as though they are compromising their values.

Gen Z wants sustainable fashion but won't give up on fast fashion

It can be argued that Gen Z displays a certain level of hypocrisy when it comes to fast fashion. A study by SHU revealed a paradox among Gen Z fashion consumers: 94% of respondents claimed to support sustainable clothing, yet 17% of them shopped at a fast fashion retailer every week, and 62% did so at least once a month. Only 10% of the participants said they had never purchased from fast-fashion outlets. On average, this age group spends around €710 annually on fast fashion items ([Uniform Market, 2024](#)).

PROGRESSIVE CHANGES IN CONSUMERS' BEHAVIOURS, EDUCATION AS A MITIGATION MEASURE

Paths to change: consumers awareness

Despite these issues related to consumers behaviours, there are several pathways through which consumers can begin to resolve their cognitive dissonance and shift towards more sustainable fashion choices. One important factor is education and awareness. As consumers become more educated about the environmental impact of fast fashion, they may feel more compelled to make changes to their purchasing habits. Initiatives such as the [Fashion Revolution](#) movement and their campaigns like "#Haulternative" encourage consumers to think critically about their clothing purchases and challenge the cultural norms of overconsumption.

Another promising development is the rise of sustainable fashion alternatives. As consumer demand for eco-friendly fashion increases, more brands are emerging that prioritize sustainability, from using organic materials to promoting circular fashion models. The growing availability of affordable and stylish sustainable fashion options has made it easier for consumers to choose environmentally friendly garments without compromising on style or budget. Sustainable fashion is becoming a competitive segment, driven by both consumer demand and brand innovation ([McKinsey, 2021](#)).

Policymakers and governments also have a role to play in reducing cognitive dissonance by incentivising sustainable fashion practices. The European Union has introduced legislation aimed at promoting circularity in fashion, such as the "Circular Economy Action Plan," which encourages the reuse, recycling, and reduction of textile waste (European Commission, 2020). These initiatives aim to shift the burden of responsibility from individual consumers to the industry itself, facilitating a more sustainable and systemic approach to fashion.

Strategies for encouraging sustainable customer choices

Overcoming barriers

One of the primary challenges is the perception that sustainable options are more expensive than fast fashion. Many consumers prioritise affordability, especially in a society driven by constant consumption and low-cost goods. Managers can counter this by emphasising the long-term value of sustainable products, such as durability, versatility, and ethical sourcing, thus reframing the concept of "cost" beyond the immediate price tag.

Convenience is another major barrier. Sustainable products may not always be as easily accessible or may require more effort to find. Brands can address this by making

sustainable options more visible, easier to purchase, and integrated into mainstream retail channels. For instance, offering convenient online shopping platforms with easy-to-understand eco-labels can make sustainable choices just as accessible as their non-sustainable counterparts.

Many consumers are unaware of the environmental impacts of their purchases or the benefits of sustainable alternatives. Brands can play a crucial role by providing clear, transparent information about product origins, materials, and sustainability efforts. This can include educational campaigns and detailed eco-labels to inform consumers about their environmental footprint.

Nudging

One effective strategy for influencing consumer behavior is the concept of "nudging." Nudging refers to the use of subtle cues and prompts to encourage desirable behaviour without restricting their choices. In the context of sustainable fashion, this could involve strategies such as eco-labels on products, which make it easier for consumers to identify more environmentally friendly options. Additionally, providing reminders to reduce waste, such as offering recycling bins in stores or digital reminders for clothing care, can prompt consumers to adopt more sustainable habits.

Positive Reinforcement

Another key strategy is the use of positive reinforcement. Rewarding consumers for making sustainable choices can significantly boost engagement. Brands can implement loyalty programs that offer discounts, points, or exclusive offers for eco-friendly purchases. Similarly, showcasing success stories—whether through brand-led campaigns or customer testimonials—can help inspire others by demonstrating the positive impact of sustainable behaviour. By reinforcing the idea that sustainable choices are both beneficial and achievable, brands can cultivate a more sustainable consumer mindset and drive broader industry change.

Further strategies to promote sustainable customers' behaviours will be explored in our unit 8.

CONCLUSION

The psychological drivers of consumer behaviour in the European textile and fashion sector, including social influence, cultural norms, and demographic factors, are key contributors to unsustainable purchasing decisions. These factors lead to overconsumption, the pursuit of fleeting trends, and the disregard for environmental consequences.

Youth, women, and people with high income might be the segment of population with the most unsustainable behaviours, as they tend to renew their wardrobe more , and consume fast fashion even if, in many occasions they are aware of the detrimental impact of this behaviours. We can observe an important cognitive dissonance and contradiction between knowledge and actions in this field.

To address these issues, brands must take responsibility by promoting sustainability and educating consumers about the long-term environmental impact of their fashion choices. With greater awareness and a cultural shift toward sustainability, it is possible to reduce the environmental footprint of the fashion industry and encourage more responsible consumption in Europe.

European consumers are increasingly aware of the environmental consequences of their actions, and there is growing momentum toward sustainable fashion. European countries like Sweden, France, and the UK have begun to explore innovative ways to address textile waste, such as the introduction of extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes, which require manufacturers to take responsibility for the collection and recycling of used garments. In addition, there is a rising interest in second-hand shopping, clothing rental, and the repair and upcycling of garments as alternatives to fast fashion.

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